

Sarah Holley 1817 - 1895

By Peter Brennan

In the early 19th Century Exeter, 'by the standards of the time [it] was a large and important town', however, the industrial revolution largely by-passed the town as the 'traditional industries of wool manufacture and tanning declined' and moved north. Exeter, despite the efforts of the Improvement Commissioners in 1810 'to pave, clean and light the streets', still remained dirty and unsanitary.' The slums were appalling and 'in 1832 a cholera epidemic killed 440 people.' This was where Sarah Holley was born in 1817, grew up and plied her trade as a servant and who undertook some extracurricular activities 'on the town.'

Sarah was 21 years old when she was sentenced to ten years goal and transportation at the Devon/Exeter Quarter Sessions for stealing a watch on 2 July 1838. There is little doubt that this five foot two inch, freckled-faced brunette was resentful and very unhappy about the severity of her sentence – although it was just slightly more than the average of nine years. The gaolers reported her conduct was 'bad' before she was sent off to London to board the *Majestic*.

The *Majestic* left London on 3 October 1838 under the command of George Williamson with Peter Fisher appointed to the post of Surgeon Superintendent. Sarah may have been a problem in prison but during the voyage she behaved in an 'orderly' manner – was it the sea air or did she use her street experience to garner favour to make her lot easier? There certainly would have been a lot of competition from the other 122 transportees, and protocols had been changed to eliminate the escapades associated with the *Lady Juliana*, so she may have been less promiscuous than in her past.

Sarah arrived during the second phase of female transportation to Van Diemen's Land, known as the assignment period, which extended from 1814 to 1842. Approximately 5400 female arrived during that time with the period being c

Whatever her possible personal makeover in the voyage from England it was short lived as Sarah certainly reverted to her freer and rebellious lifestyle after arriving in Van Diemen's Land. Her first assignment was to E Wilmore JP of Longford, who was a participant in seeking a public meeting to endorse a petition to the Her Majesty and the Houses of Parliament to retain the current processes related to the Transportation and Assignment System.

Sarah committed her first breach of her initial assignment by stealing one pint of wine on 29 May 1839. The seriousness of her crime in the new colony was made very clear to her – the existing term of transportation was extended by one year! She also was confined to the Female Factory at Launceston. If she believed her initial sentence was excessive this new impost dramatically fuelled her resentment and rebelliousness. Sarah long harboured this anger and belief she had been unfairly treated and it was still apparent in her attitude and behaviour in the final year of her servitude.

Within two days Sarah was charged with drunkenness and she was charged a further three times before the end of 1839. Two of these offences were for Dissension and Disobedience of Orders for which she received ten days and three days respectively of solitary confinement at Her Majesty's Prison at Launceston. Her most severe sentence of four months hard labour in the Female Factory, Launceston was handed down for the breach of Drunkenness and absent without leave, again whilst on assignment to Wilmore.

Sarah's problems associated with accepting the constraints of her position continued in the Launceston region during 1840 through to 13 November 1842 where she was charged and sentenced a further seven times. It is clear from the records that Sarah had a binge drinking problem that led to other charges which included:- repeated dissension; insolence

and disobeying orders; out after hours; and absent without leave. It seemed to matter little to whom she was assigned, although Wilmore appears again in March 1841. Others to be plagued by this persistent reoffender were Stonehouse, Parker twice, and Major Gray twice in the middle of 1840 – the Major was a known hardman, who had participated in reprisal actions against local natives in 1829 and 1830. Her sentences covered the full gamut available and ranged from four hours in the stocks, to four, seven and ten days solitary confinement, through a short six weeks of hard labour, to one lot of three months and two sentences of six months.

It would appear that the authorities and the good burghers of Launceston wanted no further truck with Sarah after she completed her last sentence handed down in November 1842 as she moved south. Sarah's association with the Female Factory, Hobart began with her deprivation of her conditional freedom by a sentence of six months hard labour for representing herself to be free in 18 January 1843.

Sarah's predisposition to the excessive use of alcohol continued unabated and featured in six of the charges brought against her from 1843 to April 1849. In all she was charged and served time in the Cascade Female Factory on twelve separate occasions in that period, with sentences ranging from two to six months hard labour. Some new offences were added to her portfolio generated in Launceston and included; having the keys to the store improperly in her possession; using obscene language to her mistress and disobeying orders; in a public house after hours and assaulting a policeman; drunk and assaulting a constable in the execution of his duty; and finally a triple bumper of misconduct in being out after hours using indecent language and representing herself to be free.

The contents of the bottle provided Sarah with only so much solace as it is recorded she turned to the arms of men for comfort from time to time. Sorry to say the seeds of this comfort brought her back to the Cascade Female Factory for her confinement and delivery of two daughters. The father(s) of these children, Sarah Jane born 30 June 1847 and Elizabeth Ann born 22 September 1849, remains unknown. Elizabeth Ann died 25 September 1849.

Strange as it may seem Sarah, the notorious hell raiser from the time she landed on the shores of Van Diemen's Land in 1839 until to her last incarceration in April 1849, became more circumspect in her behaviour. Sarah's Certificate of Freedom was issued on 17 October 1849 and she struck up a relationship with Joseph Aldridge which was sustained until he died on 26 November 1880.

Joseph Aldridge was born at Hungerford, Berkshire in 1823 and was tried at the Berks Quarter Sessions on 21 February 1843 for breaking into a warehouse and stealing a ton of cheese. Aldridge was sentenced to ten years and was transported on the *Henrietta* 7 July 1843 and arrived in Hobart on 19 November 1843. The only blemish on his convict record was a sentence of four days solitary confinement on 25 January 1847 for being absent from church without cause. This younger Berkshire man must have contributed greatly to Sarah's redemption.

This pair would not have satisfied the conservative views of the religious colonialists as they co-habited before marriage and begat two daughters, Harriet Martha born 16 November 1850 and Sarah Anne born 24 January 1853. Sarah and Joseph married on 14 February 1853 and had another four children, two boys and two girls born between 1854 and 1865.

It maybe counterintuitive that Joseph died at Hobart on 26 November 1880 long before Sarah who had experienced a self-inflicted debauched lifestyle in the years before his steadying influence came into play. On top of this she bore eight children and handled the normal exigencies of a pioneer in a new and developing colony. Her life came to rest at New Norfolk on 25 April 1895 and she was buried with her late partner in the Church of England section of the Cornelian Bay Cemetery.

RIP Great-great-great-grandmother Sarah.

Sources

Re Sarah Holley

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